2: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1956
FR5 Ngoni FR5

# CHAPTER I

## THE MILITARY FOUNDATIONS OF THE NGONI KINGDOMS

After the Ngoni settled in Nyasaland their political system went through three main periods of change and development up to 1939. The first was that of pre-European days, characterized by the military kingdoms. The second was the period of direct British administration, when the chief features of the Ngoni kingdoms were latent and unrecognized. The third was the period from 1933 onwards when the passing of the Native Authority and Native Courts Ordinances gave recognition to certain traditional forms of the Ngoni political system. Since, in their early forms, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, the Ngoni kingdoms were founded on conquest, the maintenance of military power both for defence and aggression was an essential condition of their survival. We shall therefore begin the examination of the Ngoni political system with a chapter on their military organization. Men of the Swazi and of trans-Zambesi clans were proud of the part their fathers and grandfathers had played in Ngoni wars. These wars were recalled to the people in the recitals of oral tradition and in the songs and dances which were part of Ngoni culture. Cibambo, who has already been mentioned as the historian of his people, wrote for me in English the following account of Ngoni warfare in the old days, part of which, written in Tumbuka, was used as a reader for the schools in the Livingstonia Mission area. Cibambo had, as a young boy, seen the preparations for war, and had gone more than once as a carrier for his elder brothers who belonged to one of the last formed regiments.

### Ngoni Warfare in Old Days

¶ To the Ngoni war was like work and his heart rejoiced to think of it. When the old men sat in the kraal the talk that roused discussion was of war and their journeyings. All the heroes of the tribe had received their praise-greetings through service in war. In this, ordinary people and slaves came together, for though they might have been unknown to begin with, if they were heroes in one or two wars the whole country knew them. The slaves who showed their courage and strength in war quickly received their freedom and many also had villages of their own because of the people they had captured in war; others obtained the standing of men in authority. Those who were cowards were humiliated and laughed at, and those who had not entered the enemy stockade or killed a man were not allowed to dance in triumph in the kraal but only to join in the *ligubo* dance along with others.



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(*b*) At first I died and when I rose up again I felt the wind of the spirits. My dying was my initiation. This *ukutwasa* was like that of the moon when it is new. I began to speak and speak and I danced with the python skin on my head. Then the people tested me whether I had bad or good spirits and after that I began to divine. The spirit of my grandfather, he has told me about this work. I am talking with his spirit when the horn is going round.

The fact of my being in Mcakhatha during the illness and death of Bambo Manga, and witnessing all the attendant ritual, gave me many opportunities of discussing the role of diviners in the ancestor cult, as well as of observing two of them at work. No such opportunity presented itself in the northern kingdom, but the role of the diviner was very fully discussed with leading Ngoni in Ekwendeni, Ezondweni and Hoho, and the account given by Cibambo at the beginning of this chapter was partly the result of these talks.

I have made several references to the graded hierarchy among the diviners, though I have not made any connexion between those diviners who either prophesied or made a diagnosis and those others, whether they were called *izanusi* or *izing'anga*, who made a diagnosis and also gave treatment through medicines. I have limited the analysis here to the diviners who operated through their own ancestral spirits and who, by virtue of this contact of theirs, claimed to be able to interpret the will of the ancestral spirits of the Ngoni clans. It was a notable fact that very few of the famous diviners, and none of the less well-known, were of Swazi clans, though the one true prophet in the story of the slaughter at Mabiri was of a Swazi clan. Two great *izinduna* and *alumuzana*, who were also dreamers and prophets, Gwaza Jere in the north and Golozela Nzunga in the central kingdom, were of Swazi clans. So also was the famous woman diviner NaNdumbu. It appeared that the capacity to become a diviner and the successful practice of the art was very unusual among the leading Ngoni. They depended therefore on men of lesser trans-Zambesi and cis-Zambesi clans to perform these duties for them. The attitude shown by leading Ngoni towards the diviners, already referred to, may have been partly a rationalization of their dependence on this kind of skill as well as on force of arms. It may also have been due to the necessity, admitted somewhat reluctantly, of using men of lower social status, that is of cis-Zambesi clans, for such vital services to the nation and to their own families. The Ngoni had a strong pragmatic streak which led them to suspect knowledge and skill which could not be reduced to concrete terms, and hence they were always ready to accuse the less well accredited diviners of lying and deceit.

In spite of Ngoni doubts and suspicions about the class of diviners as a whole, within their kingdoms these persons were recognized as specialists for certain reasons. They had all been through the experience described as *ukutwasa*. It began with physical symptoms, such as fainting,

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939)1960
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105 621 senior men who related to me historial events, family geneologies, war-songs and other Ngoni traditional knowledge, including the ideas and methods of bringing up Ngoni children. In the evenings the schoolboys gathered by my hut to [124] [191] practise their English, to discuss their school work and their plans for the future. The tsetse menace had for some time been threatening the cattle and losses were considerable. The boys wanted above all to emigrate and find work so that they could earn money to send home to their fathers to buy more cattle, pay taxes, buy clothes, guns and ammunition, for it was lion country.

Out of the thirty-one households in the village, twenty- [162] five belonged to the men of Ngoni clans. There were nine [592] elderly widows of Ngoni leading families, and of the younger women eighteen were true Ngoni. There was therefore both among the men and the women, and in the senior and younger age-groups, a high proportion of those who were true Ngoni and who practised the Ngoni way of living. It was a village where Ngoni cultural patterns were very much in evidence, and where the school and the church, representing modern developments, were closely integrated with village life.

Emcakateni was just off a main road and as easily acces- [361] sible as Enkodlweni was remote. It was perched on a hill-top in a commanding position, and was much larger, with a hundred and twenty-two households compared with thirty-one. There were several kraals and many cattle, no tsetse menace, but lions in the neighbourhood which more than once attacked the kraal at night. Outsiders, that is of non-Ngoni clans, who had money, had married into the chief's and other leading families, and these households possessed well-built brick houses. I lived in a grass-and-pole hut in- [342] side a fence, near the compound of the big house. There was [871] no school in the village, and the nearest one was run by a [797] mission disliked by the leading Ngoni. The boys spent all their time with the cattle, or hunting or practising crafts.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
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away from the other two. They were the four most accessible from my base camp, built at a site chosen by the Administration. I was able to compare their size, history, and kinship structure with those of many other villages I visited, and as far as I could tell they were in these respects fairly typical Ngoni villages. They form a sample of approximately one per cent of the whole of the Fort Jameson Ngoni.

The tables in which the units are individuals or extant marriages (III, IV, IX, X, XIII and XIV) are based on the marital histories of the men and woman normally resident in those villages during the latter part of 1948, in one village, and during the earlier part of 1949 in the other five. In Tables I, II, V to VIII, XI and XII, where the units are marriages and not individuals, I have drawn on the histories of men and women who lived in these villages as wedded people for at least part of the time from 1946 to 1949. I endeavoured to interview the whole population but failed to do so for various reasons. I was however, able to determine who was, and who was not, a resident in these villages, and can therefore indicate the number of people who could have been included in this six-village sample had more been known about them. Some of my interviews were only partial.

In Tables V to VIII, which deal with the incidence and magnitude of marriage payments, each marriage is classified by the decade in which it began. This is not necessarily the decade in which the payment was made, for as we have noted payments are sometime made after many years of marriage. Unfortunately I do not have enough information to classify by the decade of payment.

In the tables I have used the word 'wedded' to refer to all people who had ever been married, whether or not they were currently married at the time of inquiry.

It will be seen from Table III that in this sample there was no unwedded man over the age of twenty-four, and, out of a total of 116 wedded men, there were only one widower and seven men whose last marriage had ended in divorce and who had not remarried. From Table IV we see that there was only one unwedded woman over the age of nineteen, but that there were as many as 31 widows who had not remarried. Only about a half, 122 out of 223, of the wedded women were living with their husbands.

Marriage is then an experience that sooner or later comes to nearly every man or woman, although not every adult lives all the time in a simple family of procreation. Nevertheless, the ties forged by marriage remain, and the results of marriage extend beyond the wedding ceremony and beyond the domestic association of man and wife. It is the sexual activities of individuals that are most closely regulated by the fact of marriage. In succession to office and wealth, marriage, as we shall see, plays nowadays a permissive rather than a determining role. It is only by means of the symbolic acts which form part of marriage that a man can be reasonably sure of acquiring rights over his wife and the custody of his children. Yet he may,

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583 in childbirth the husband is held to be responsible at least in part.
593 He must pay one cow[10] to the dead woman's kin to appease them. It is said that if bridewealth has been paid the man need not pay another beast, but that the woman's relatives would take a beast from the bridewealth and kill that in order to mourn their kinswoman.

593 The separation of interest that continues even after a marriage has been contracted is demonstrated by the payments which husband and wife are required to make to each other. Although they use many things in common, their possessions are thought of as belonging either to the one or the other. A man may own chickens, although his wife looks after them for him, while a woman may own a beast and let her husband care for it. If husband and wife quarrel the one who apologizes may offer a chicken to the other to make peace. These payments are in part enforced by public opinion

**Table VIII. Incidence of legalization payment, by decades**

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| Legalization payment | Date of marriage | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1878–87 | 1888–97 | 1898–1907 | 1908–17 | 1918–27 | 1928–37 | 1938–47 | 1948–9 | Not known | |
| Offered and accepted .. | 1 | 4 | 15 | 34 | 33 | 30 | 83 | 13 | 3 | 216 |
| Offered but refused | – | – | – | 1 | – | 1 | 3 | – | – | 5 |
| Not offered .. | – | 9 | 12 | 21 | 29 | 27 | 30 | 3 | 4 | 135 |
| Total .. .. | 1 | 13 | 27 | 56 | 62 | 58 | 116 | 16 | 7 | 356 |
| Ratio of offers to total number .. | 100% | 31% | 56% | 63% | 53% | 53% | 74% | 81% | — | 62% |
| Not known if offer was made or accepted .. | 1 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 14 | 11 | 17 | 8 | 3 | 70 |
| Grand total .. | 2 | 16 | 34 | 62 | 76 | 69 | 133 | 24 | 10 | 426 |

124 **Informants**

| | Used | Potential | % Used |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 122 | 135 | 90·4 |
| Women | 232 | 251 | 92·4 |
| Total | 354 | 386 | 91·7 |

Number of marriages in which both partners were informants 122

[10] Called *mulumo*, from the Nsenga verb, *ku-luma*, to bite or chew. The corresponding payment among the Cewa is said to be called *mtupa* or *nthupa*. Cf. Young, op. cit., p. 62.

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woman who lived near the place where he was working, with the idea of taking her as his third wife. Ruth, the great wife, was living with Zachariah at the time, and tried to prevent him from marrying this woman. Zachariah desisted but then became so angry with Ruth that he gave her sixpence and said she was divorced. She went back to her village, saying she would get a divorce in the court. She stayed at her father's village for some time and then went back to her husband.

In October there was another quarrel between Ruth and Zachariah. According to Zachariah he told his wife to bring some tobacco from inside the hut and she refused, whereupon there was a fight. Ruth took the matter to court, complaining that in the fight Zachariah had hurt her so

**Table XI. Divorce ratios**

| Ratio | Value |
|---|---|
| A | 28·5% (115/403) |
| B | 55·8% (115/206) |
| C | 36·9% (115/312) |

Legend

A The number of marriages ended in divorce expressed as a percentage of all marriages

B The number of marriages ended in divorce expressed as a percentage of all completed marriages

C The number of marriages ended in divorce expressed as a percentage of all marriages except those ended by death

Informants

| | Used | Potential | % Used |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 117 | 136 | 86·0 |
| Women | 222 | 251 | 88·4 |
| Total | 339 | 387 | 87·6 |

Number of marriages in which both partners were informants 111

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**Table XIII. Residence of husband and wife, 1948-9**

| Wife's residence | Husband's residence: Rural | Husband's residence: Away | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intra-village .. .. | 22·8% (31) | 26% (12) | 23·6% (43) |
| Virilocal .. .. | 52·9% (72) | 30% (14) | 47·3% (86) |
| Uxorilocal .. .. | 17·6% (24) | 43% (20) | 24·2% (44) |
| Neither related .. | 1·5% (2) | 0% (0) | 1·1% (2) |
| Separated .. .. | 5·1% (7) | — | 3·8% (7) |
| Total .. .. .. | 100·0% (136) | 100% (46) | 100·0% (182) |

Legend

| | |
|---|---|
| Rural | Husband living in a village within thirty miles of his wife, either permanently or part-time. |
| Away | Husband living permanently on a farm, in Port Jameson township or more than thirty miles away from his wife. |
| Intra-village | Wife living in a village to which both she and her husband belong. |
| Virilocal | Wife living in her husband's village which is not her own village. |
| Uxorilocal | Wife living in her own village which is not her husband's village. |
| Neither related | Wife living in a village to which neither she nor her husband belong. |
| Separated | Wife and husband living in different villages and separated from each other. |

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| Informants | | Used | Potential | % Used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Men | 98 | 108 | 91 |
| | Women | 175 | 175 | 100 |
| | Total | 273 | 283 | 96 |

Number of marriages in which both partners were informants 110

9: Read E-5 (1935) 1936 FR5 Ngoni FR5



the reason for this enthusiasm about being 'written up'. 'At last', he said, 'someone will know about us.' He went on to speak with regret about the old days when one or two missionaries and others really knew about the Ngoni and could speak their language. He then spoke with bitterness about the present, lamenting that the Ngoni were no longer regarded as a great people. Gradually it became evident that the Ngoni, being very conscious themselves of their distinctive cultural identity, and of their positive achievements in setting up the Ngoni state, expect other people to recognize this too. They keep constantly before them memories of their past greatness, and they dwell gloomily on the coming of the Europeans which marked the end of their ascendancy.

IV. THE HISTORICAL SENSE OF THE NGONI. From the beginning of my stay among the Ngoni the chiefs and leading men impressed on me the importance of knowing about their past. In each area the Paramount Chief arranged that 'historians', that is, old men accredited by him as having correct information, should come to dictate Ngoni history to me. At first this relating of history took place in public before any who liked to listen. The old historians, however, grizzled warriors of many fights, trembled and stammered in giving their accounts, because the Paramount Chief so impressed on them the importance of the occasion, and pulled them up sharply when they hesitated over names or events. At the subsequent private sittings, where the old men could argue fiercely with each other without any fear of causing shame before an audience, the accounts were much more coherent, and, as the Paramount Chief assured me, correct. After one such taking down of history in the Paramount's village, I went to stay in the village of one of these 'historians', a very much respected *mukwezana* and one of the 'best families'. He gently but firmly put aside my scheme of studying village organization and economic life, saying, 'First you ought to know about our beginnings'.[1] After giving me still more detailed accounts of Ngoni history, he explained that though much of their social life was mixed up to-day with that of other tribes, their history and traditions were distinct and belonged to them alone. Hence I ought to have it written

[1] He used the verb *kukunda*, which implies root or origin.

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down fully and correctly. When I arrived in Chief Gomani's country, after having stayed in the other two Ngoni areas, the chiefs and leading men whom he called to see me asked at once, 'What did the other Ngoni do to show you they were Ngoni? *We* want you first to hear the story of our people.' If I said to any older man of good standing, that is of a true Ngoni clan, 'Tell me about the Ngoni', he invariably began with the traditions of the south and their trek north.

I have some fifteen long texts[1] of Ngoni history, most of which begin with the stories of Dingiswayo and Zwidi, leading on to the rise of Chaka and the Ngoni exodus from the south. These texts not only show a measure of agreement with each other, but they also are verifiable by established history as recorded by Europeans. Those texts which came from Gomani's country contain different material after the exodus from the south. For the Ngoni under the leadership of the Maseko clan came north with Mzilikazi and the Matabele, and crossing the Zambesi alone, went east of Lake Nyasa into Tanganyika.[2] The main Ngoni group under the Jere clan went west of Lake Nyasa into Tanganyika, and remained a united group until the death of Zwangendaba in 1848. A disputed succession followed and the Ngoni split up under two rival Paramounts, Mpezeni and Mwambera. The history of those years, as related to-day, is largely concerned with proving in each area that their Paramount is the only rightful one, the only one to whom the royal salute *Bayete* should be given. Mpezeni's historians say, 'Mwambera snatched *Bayete*'—and vice versa. In spite of these divergences in later history, however, the Ngoni point to their earlier history and say, 'You see we are all one people'. They are conscious of, and troubled about, their present divisions and inclined to attribute them to our premature arrival in the country. 'You came too soon. We would have fought until there was only one *inkosi*.'

The detailed knowledge of Ngoni history is regarded as the province of a specialist. 'How can a man of no wisdom remember all those names?' From time to time 'historians' tell episodes of this traditional history in the villages of the Paramount or of other im-

[1] 800–1,000 words.

[2] This is their own account and is confirmed by the Rev. Charles Stuart, formerly at Ekwendeni, but not so far recorded by other Europeans.